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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAHRAN 000046

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PLEASE PASS TO NEA/ARP JOSHUA HARRIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 3/25/2019
TAGS: SA, KU, PGOV, PHUM, PINR, KIRF, KISL, KDEM
SUBJECT: SHI'A PROTESTS LEAD TO ARRESTS, INCLUDING TWO AMERICANS

REF: A. 09 RIYADH 346
B. 08 RIYADH 1197
C. 09 DHAHRAN 40
D. 09 DHAHRAN 8
E. 09 RIYADH 270

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CLASSIFIED BY: Julie Stineheart, Acting Consul General, EXEC,
DOS.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

1. (C/NF) Key Points:

-- On Thursday, March 19 Shi'a from the Awamiyya village in the Qatif oasis conducted a sit-in to protest the SAG's intention of arresting the radical Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, who has been in hiding since calling for possible secession from Saudi Arabia.

-- A couple of hours after the protest, Saudi security forces reportedly arrested more than a dozen Saudi Shi'a, mainly youth, including two dual American-Saudi citizen brothers.

-- Shi'a leaders assert that SAG actions taken since the Baqi'a cemetery incident (ref A) have only increased frustrations among the Shi'a and raised the prospect for sectarian violence.

-- Contacts point to the Ministry of Interior and Prince Naif bin Abdulaziz Al Saud as ultimately behind many of the abuses and discrimination of the Shi'a.

-- The prominent Sheikh Hassan al-Saffar said that the Shi'a in Kuwait enjoy a cooperative relationship with their government, while the SAG resorts to force and arrests as a means of interacting with its Shi'a citizens.

End key points.

2. (C) PROTESTS IN AWAMIYYA. During Friday prayers on March 13, Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr (ref B) of the Awamiyya village in predominantly Shi'a Qatif reportedly gave a fiery sermon where he declared, "If we [Shi'a] don't get our dignity, then we will have to consider seceding from this country [Saudi Arabia]." In response, the Saudi Special Emergency Force (the riot police) came to arrest al-Nimr, but he had gone into hiding. On the evening of Thursday, March 19 a few hundred Shi'a conducted a sit-in protest at the main square of Awamiyya in support of the controversial sheikh. The sit-in lasted about two hours with protesters holding up pictures of al-Nimr and signs reading "dignity." (Note: Al-Nimr resides in Awamiyya, which is a notoriously radical Shi'a village in the Qatif oasis referred to half-jokingly by other Qatifis as "Little Falluja." As one Shi'a contact told PolOff, "every house in Awamiyya has a gun... seriously." End Note.)

3. (C/NF) AN AMERICAN IS ARRESTED. Around midnight, after the sit-in protest ended, the Special Emergency Forces (SEF) reportedly cut out the electricity to a part of Awamiyya and then arrested dozens of Shi'a youth, some reportedly as young as 12 years old. Noah Ali Saleh Abduljabbar, a 28-year-old American-Saudi dual citizen, was among those arrested on March 19. Post contacted his brother, Abdulmajid, on Saturday, March

21. He said that his other brother, Amar, also an American citizen, was subsequently arrested on March 20. He could not confirm reports that Noah was beaten by the police; however, he had not spoken with either of his brothers since their arrest nor did the Saudi authorities contact his family. Abdulmajid said he only knew that his brother Noah was arrested because one of his friends told him what had happened. Once Amar disappeared, they just assumed it was the SEF too.

4. (C/NF) INCREASED POLICE PRESENCE IN QATIF. On March 21,

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XXXXXXXXXXXX (protect), the manager of XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX and a respected community activist, told PolOff that the SEF had dramatically increased their presence in Qatif. He said that additional riot police and vehicles have been brought to Qatif, hidden in the back of police stations. He downplayed the importance of Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr and said that his following is limited to Awamiyya, and only a few hundred people are fervent followers. However, he voiced his concern that if one of al-Nimr's radical followers took up arms against the security forces, then the SAG might retaliate by indiscriminately killing innocent Shi'a.

5. (C/NF) FRUSTRATION. Since the sectarian clashes at the Baqi'a cemetery in Medina (ref A), a wide-range of Shi'a leaders and activists have repeatedly told PolOff of the mounting frustrations among the Shi'a (ref C, D). In a March 18 meeting with prominent municipal council member, XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX (protect), he told PolOff that the SAG is only using "security measures" to resolve issues of discrimination. Aside from the arbitrary arrest of Shi'a, he cited inflammatory remarks that Interior Minister Prince Naif bin Abdulaziz Al Saud published on March 14 in response to the Baqi'a incident. He said that the Shi'a must respect the doctrine of the "Sunnis and our righteous forefathers," blaming the Shi'a for the problems in Medina.

(Comment: Several contacts, including XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX, often cite MOI and Prince Naif in particular as the source of most sectarian discrimination. They believe that any orders given to arrest or harass Shi'a in the Eastern Province come straight from Prince Naif. End Comment.)

6. (C/NF) TENSIONS HIGH AMONG SHI'A AND SUNNI YOUTH. XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX noted that tensions are especially high among both the Shi'a and Sunni youth. He recently met with a Sunni leader from Anak (the only village in Qatif with a majority Sunni population) to discuss the rising tensions among the youth in their respective communities. The Sunni leader from Anak told XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX that young Sunnis from the conservative province of Qassim were

coming to Anak to "protect their Sunni brothers" from Shi'a aggression. XXXXXXXXXXXX said that the Anak Sunni leader told them not to come and to stay away. XXXXXXXXXXXX's concerns about the youth potentially being the flashpoint for sectarian violence echo previous warnings (ref E).

7. (C/NF) "ENOUGH" IS ENOUGH. In early March, several Shi'a blogs carried a statement by a new Saudi Shi'a movement called "Enough" (Khalas). (Note: Some English language sources translated the movement name as "Salvation," but native Arabic speakers at post said that "Enough" or "Finished" is the intended meaning. End Note.) Post contacts believe that the well-written and forceful statement comes from a new Saudi Shi'a movement based out of London. The statement calls for the use of "all legitimate means to confront the unjust policies imposed by the [Saudi] government against the Shiites." The statement uses aggressive language such as "illegitimate," "failure," "extreme frustration," "oppression," "defamation," "force;" although, it stops short of calling for outright violence. XXXXXXXXXXXX noted that the statement was not only a criticism of the SAG, but also of the moderate Shi'a leadership (i.e. Sheikh Hassan al-Saffar, Isa al-Muzel, Sadeq al-Jubran, Dr. Tawfiq al-Saif and himself) who have failed to bring an end to sectarian discrimination through dialogue with the SAG.

8. (C/NF) SHI'A IN KUWAIT GOT IT GOOD. On March 20, Sheikh XXXXXXXXXXXX (protect), a highly respected Shi'a leader and frequent interlocutor of the SAG, held a public talk with about 500 members of the Shi'a community in Qatif. According to XXXXXXXXXXXX (protect), who was in attendance, XXXXXXXXXXXX described his recent trip to Kuwait where he met with the Shi'a community there. He said that the GOK supports the Shi'a and vice versa. He described how the GOK allows the Shi'a to have their school of law (Jaffari) represented in the Ministry of Justice. XXXXXXXXXXXX also noted that while the GOK looks to improve the stake of the Shi'a in their country, the SAG, on the other hand, arbitrarily arrests its Shi'a citizens without STINEHART

=====CABLE ENDS=====